

VZCZCXR09389

PP RUEHBC RUEHKUK RUEHROV

DE RUEHLB #0406 0791423

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

P 191423Z MAR 08

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1323

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS BEIRUT 000406

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/DEMOPOLOUS/YERGER

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PROSPECT OF HIZBALLAH WAR WITH ISRAEL PROMPTS SOME LEBANESE TO PREPARE FOR THE WORST

SUMMARY

¶11. (U) Rumors of an imminent Hizballah-Israeli war have spread throughout various regions of Lebanon, namely southern Lebanon, the Biqa', and the southern suburbs of Beirut. These rumors have led many to prepare themselves for such a war: renewing their passports, stocking up on food, applying for visas, and renting houses in "safer" areas. The presence of the USS Cole off the Lebanese territorial waters earlier this month and rumors of a Saudi decision to evacuate its citizens from Lebanon augmented the feeling of fear among the Lebanese. Some Amcits have also voiced their concerns of an imminent conflict.

REPORTS OF PREPARATIONS
IN CASE OF WAR

¶12. (U) The Lebanese press recently has been reporting stories of Lebanese citizens' preparations for what is perceived as an imminent Hizballah war with Israel, namely in southern Lebanon and the Biqa'. Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah's recent threat of an open war and Hizballah's expected retaliation for the assassination of one of its leaders, Imad Mugniyah, as well as the overall precarious political situation in Lebanon prompted some jittery Lebanese to prepare their passports in order to flee the country or rent apartments in "safe" areas.

¶13. (U) The Associated France Press (AFP) quoted Lina Melhem, a resident of the southern suburbs of Beirut as saying, "I renewed my passport and those of my three children because I'm scared something is going to happen." Mohammed, a resident of the southern village of Qlayle, which was heavily bombed during the July 2006 war, told the AFP that he was looking to rent an apartment in Aley, east of Beirut. Furthermore, in the Hizballah stronghold in eastern Biqa', residents have been looking for houses in predominantly Christian areas, which they deem more protected from potential Israeli air strikes.

¶14. (U) The AFP also reported that an official at the passport office in Baalbeck said he has seen a 30 percent surge in the numbers of passports issued in recent weeks. Another security official in the southern town of Tyre told the AFP that his office was receiving up to 400 requests a day for passport renewals, compared to 75 previously.

¶15. (U) Daily al-Akhbar, a pro-opposition newspaper, reported that Lebanese working with UNIFIL have been asked to prepare documents to facilitate their expeditious departure from Lebanon, insinuating an imminent conflict. Press also reported that UNIFIL bolstered its positions along the eastern sector of its operations and installed

six security towers in a 500-meter area. These security towers surround the Lebanese part of the village of Ghajar, bordering Israel. (Note: Charge will meet UNIFIL Force Commander MG Graziano this week and will follow up on these reports. End note.)

¶6. (SBU) Yassine Jaber, a Shia MP from the southern town of Nabatiyeh, told Polstaff March 5 that those in his hometown have been renting houses in Sidon and Jezzine because they believe these areas are safer. Additionally, Beirut residents have rented houses in Mount Lebanon, specifically in Broumanna, Faraya, and other pre-dominantly Christian areas. Afaf Ghaddar, manager at a business company called Credit Card Services, told Polstaff that the company has set up a back up office in Jordan in case of a war in Lebanon. Ghaddar added that the company is ready to continue providing its services to its clients from its Jordan offices.

AMCITS VOICE CONCERN
OF IMMINENT WAR

¶7. (U) Some Amcits have also voiced their concerns of an imminent war. Conoff reported that the American Citizens Services section has received increased calls indicating that some Amcits are much more concerned about the situation than they were a few months ago. Furthermore, he noted that more and more Amcits are asking questions about how they can sponsor family members to come to the U.S.; these Amcits have generally told Conoff they plan on returning to the U.S. within the next few months.

SISON